DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 375 405 CS 214 550

AUTHOR Dodson, Charles B.
TITLE Genji, Keats, and "Mono No Aware."
PUB DATE Apr 94
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the College English Association (Overland Park, KS, April 1-4, 1993).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS English Literature; Higher Education; *Literary Criticism; *Literature Appreciation; *Multicultural Education
IDENTIFIERS Japanese Literature; *Keats (John); Response to Literature; Shikibu (Murasaki); *Tale of Genji (The)

ABSTRACT

Using a canonical literary text to elucidate a noncanonical one--and vice versa--is an effective means of teaching multicultural literature. For instance, John Keats' "Ode to Melancholy" and many of his other poems comment on Murasaki Shikibu's 10th-century Japanese novel "The Tale of Genji." Helping college students to understand the concept of "mono no aware," a pervasive feature in the Japanese novel, becomes considerably less difficult with the help of a western text employing virtually the same technique. "Aware" can be defined as the simultaneous existence of beauty and sadness in life as well as the ability of a character to see this in even the most ordinary of events. After students have begun reading the Japanese novel, an instructor might follow a three-step process: (1) define "aware"; (2) pass out Keats' "Ode" as a reinforcement and ask students to free write, as homework, a journal entry relating it to the novel; (3) after a discussion of the journal entries, guide students through a reading of the poem and then suggest passages from previously assigned readings in the novel that parallel the ideas in the ode. Three themes might be emphasized in the ode: how nature mirrors the poet's mood; how Keats selects natural objects that are both beautiful and transitory; and how Keats plays on the imminence of death. (TB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 375 405

Genji, Keats, and Mono No Aware

by Charles B. Dodson
Univ. of North Carolina at Wilmington

College English Association Conference, April 1993

Of the many possible responses to this year's conference topic--"What's 'English' in the Emerging Department of English?"--surely one will be, as has been the case in recent years, the practice of using both canonical and noncanonical texts to comment upon and elucidate each other. As the content of English continues to expand beyond the classics of British and American literature to include not just minority and colonial voices within these traditions, but other third world and Asian voices outside these traditions as well, we as teachers will continue to see, and convey to our students, the insights about the world and the human condition shared among texts separated widely by time, language, and culture.

A case in point is how I have drawn upon the poetry of Keats, and especially his "Ode on Melancholy," to help students in my world literature survey understand the concept of mono no aware, perhaps the most pervasive feature of Murasaki Shikibu's tenth-century Japanese novel The Tale of Genji.

Aware can be defined as the simultaneous existence of beauty and sadness in life as well as the ability of a character to see this in even the most ordinary of events, or, as Margaret Berry

CS214550

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL IN OTHER THAN PAPER COPY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
C. B. Dodson
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

has paraphrased aware, "sensitivity to the beauty-in-sorrow and sorrow-in-beauty of life, the. . . capacity of a person to feel--in response to the beauty of forms forever poised on the brink of dissolution" (10). Genji possesses this capacity in its fullest sense.

Aware manifests itself in many ways in the novel. I would like to discuss three of them, though in doing so I have to make them appear much more distinct from each other than they really are. Such Keatsian themes as how nature mirrors the observer's mood, especially through the simultaneous perception of sadness in beauty and beauty in in sadness; the brevity and fragility of beauty, youth, and love; and the ambiguous relationship between pleasure and pain, life and death, found in such poems as "Why Did I Laugh Tonight?" "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles," "Ode to a Nightingale," "Ode on a Grecian Urn," and especially the "Ode on Melancholy" can exemplify for students aware as a state of mind and an outlook on life.

Because of time restraints I depend for my analogies mostly on the "Ode on Melancholy," whose second and third stanzas in particular would no doubt seem strikingly familiar to Murasaki Shikibu herself. My method is, briefly, as follows. I define aware very early in the three to four weeks we spend on the novel, pointing out varying examples of it in the opening chapters. Once the students have started to become familiar with

the concept through their reading and class discussion, I pass out as reinforcement a copy of Keats's "Ode" and ask the students to free write, as homework, a journal entry relating it to the novel. After discussion of these journal responses, sometimes as a class and sometimes in small groups, I guide the class through a reading of the poem, to make sure they understand what is going on in the poem itself; and then the class and I suggest passages from previously assigned reading in the novel that parallel the ideas in the ode. Students note further parallels in subsequent assignments.

I emphasize three themes in the poem especially. First, in stanza two external nature mirrors the speaker's mood--for example, he is in a "melancholy fit," so the flowers are "droop-headed" and "the green hill" is hidden in a "shroud."

Second, I point out how Keats selects natural objects that are both beautiful and transitory--in stanza two, a "morning rose," "the rainbow," and "globed peonies"; Keats then introduces the human element, "thy mistress," who "dwells with Beauty," but a beauty so transitory that it "must die" even as the rose, the rainbow, and the peonies. It is the same with "Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips / Bidding adieu," and with Pleasure, which turns "to poison" even as it is experienced.

Thus I have also pointed out a third theme that the poem shares with <u>The Tale of Genji</u>--the implicit imminence of death or

at least sadness in even the most transcendent moments of experience. The phrase "in the very temple of Delight / Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine" epitomizes the fine line that aware draws between beauty and sadness, pleasure and pain. And Keats's final caveat, that the insight he has discovered can be "seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue / Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine" fits Genji perfectly, for indeed the very successes of his political acts and prodigious sexual adventuring only sadden him, remind him of the transitoriness of happiness, and lead him, at the height of his political influence and artistic triumph, to reflect that "[f]urther glory could only bring uncertainty. He wanted to withdraw quietly and make preparations for the next life" (360), thus ending on a quite somber note the twelve-chapter condensation of the novel that I use in the course.

The discussion of Keats's ode fairly early in our study of the novel helps students, as they continue their reading, to perceive many of the subtle permutations of aware in the novel.

For example, like Keats and the other romantics, both Murasaki Shikibu and her characters are extremely sensitive to their natural surroundings, and they often perceive nature in terms of their own emotional state. Thus the beauty of a reed plain is "melancholy," the insects hum "sadly" as Genji travels to a farewell meeting with one of his mistresses, and members of

his retinue are moved by "how beautifully the melancholy scene set him off" (187). "Clouds traced sad lines across the sky" after a devastating typhoon (284; my emphasis). One lonely night during Genji's banishment to the seashore, "[t]here was sadness [even] in the sound of the temple bells borne in on pine breezes" (301; note how the image combines the natural and the manmade, just as Wordsworth juxtaposes the human with the natural as he describes the countryside in the opening lines of "Tintern Abbey"). When, early in the novel, Genji's first wife dies, he mourns her during "one of those late autumn dawns when the very sound of the wind seems to sink into one's bones" (169).

Indeed, death and premonitions of death pervade the novel. Four of the most important women in his life sicken and die, three of them (his mother, his mistress Yugao, and his first wife Aoi) while they are still very young. We are told several times that the young Genji is so beautiful and accomplished that many at court fear he will have an early death. And "each year, as he matured, his good looks produced a stronger shudder of [simultaneous] delight and foreboding" (116) among the courtiers. Similarly, Genji's and Fujitsubo's infant son is deemed "so beautiful as to arouse fears that he would not be long in this world" (119). The deaths of both his father and Aoi "in successive years had informed [Genji] of the futility of human affairs" (197). And even at the height of his pleasure in

observing the young Murasaki, whom he plans eventually to make his wife, Genji thinks forward to death: "He already knew how difficult it would be when the time came for the final parting" (122).

So much preoccupation with melancholy and death (and with the baleful effect of change, another pervasive theme) could result in an unrelievedly bleak and morbid tone, were it not for the cult of beauty that pervades the novel. The court society of tenth-century Japan that the novel portrays was perhaps the most aesthetically refined in all of history. The characters are almost obsessed by a search for, and cultivation in themselves of, beauty in all its manifestations--in external nature, in human appearance, in clothing, in their perfumes (even the men), in their fine arts, even in their handwriting and the kind of paper on which are written the poems by whose means they often converse with each other. Indeed, the most significant political event in the novel, in which one palace faction is victorious over another for the Emperor's regard, is resolved not by slit throats or poison, but by a contest of paintings.

However, beauty in the world of Genji is often as fragile as it is intense. Almost anticipating Keats's rose and peonies, both Genji's baby son and Murasaki are compared to wild carnations (121, 119). Yugao, "slender and fragile, seemed so delicately beautiful that [Genji] was almost afraid to hear her

voice" (44), and she can offer no resistance to the literally killing resentment of the Rokujo lady even as Yugao and Genji lie together in sleep. In fact, what plot there is in the novel consists largely of a series of sexual liaisons between Genji and various women, old and young; yet these love affairs tend to be either brief or unsatisfactory. The degree of determination with which Genji conducts them is often directly proportional to their potential for disaster. In fact, Genji often finds the most difficult and dangerous relationships the most satisfying, as he admits to himself. Thus he maintains a liaison with the sister of his bitterest enemy, Lady Kokiden, even to the point of contriving to spend the night with her in Kokiden's own house--where they are discovered, with disastrous results. And the reader has to wonder how much of Genji's obsession with Fujitsubo is due to her resemblance to his mother and how much to the fact that she is his father's favorite concubine and thus his own stepmother. The love that Genji seeks constantly throughout the novel usually eludes him, except for fleeting moments (as with Fujitsubo), a few weeks (as with Yugao), or when its admission comes too late (as in his belated recognition of his love for the dying Aoi). Not only is happiness fleeting, but its end can itself confer a sort of beauty: Genji, we are told, was "a handsomer man in sorrow than in happiness" (167).

As I mentioned earlier, other poems of Keats besides the

"Ode on Melancholy" can elucidate The Tale of Genji. "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles" laments the ravages of time and the ambiguity of pleasure. "Why Did I Laugh Tonight?" and the "Ode to a Nightengale" share the novel's preoccupation with death. "Nightengale" also speaks much of the fragility of happiness and beauty and finds in external nature a voice for the poet's anguish and frustration. The "Ode on a Grecian Urn" suggests the permanence that art can give to what in life is impermanent, a sentiment that Genji and his peers would endorse. And although I have given here only a few examples, I hope you will agree that the "Ode on Melancholy" might almost be used as a gloss on much of The Tale of Genji and especially on the many manifestations of mono no aware in that novel. The unfamiliarity of the novel's customs, psychology, and narrative manner make it difficult going for many of my students; but by pointing out similar concepts in the more familiar idiom of a master of their own literary tradition, I have been able, I think, to move my students toward a greater understanding, and therefore greater appreciation and enjoyment, of a major work from a culture and time very remote in most respects from their own.

Works Cited

Berry, Margaret. "The Meeting of the Twain: Japanese and Greek." Unpublished essay.

Keats, John. "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles," "Why Did I Laugh Tonight?" "Ode to a Nightengale," "Ode on a Grecian Urn," "Ode on Melancholy." Norton Anthology of English Literature. Ed. M. H. Abrams et al. 5th ed. 2 vols. New York: Norton, 1986. 2:798-99, 814-15, 819-25.

Shikibu, Murasaki. The Tale of Genji. Trans. & abr. Edward G. Seidensticker. New York: Random, 1985.